Jungle Shock: American Savagery in the Fiction of the Pacific War

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Abstract

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Attempting to define savagery in wartime presents major questions about the status of war: what constitutes a savage act, and how can we tell when a soldier exceeds the call of duty in violent conflicts? I placed these questions in the context of the Pacific Theater of World War II, a campaign that saw numerous atrocities committed by both Japanese and American soldiers. I was fascinated by the behavior of American troops abroad—US troops engaged in body mutilation of the enemy, revenge killings, and a number of other behaviors that contradicted the United States' stated code of military conduct. In an attempt to understand both the motivation for these atrocities and locate the often-imperceptible line between duty and savagery, I study Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and James Jones's *The Thin Red Line*, using war fiction to examine the soldier's psyche in combat. Both *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Thin Red Line*—the major Pacific War novels of their generation—concern themselves with questions of savagery, offering explanations for extreme violence ranging from the pleasurable nature of killing to "battle numbness." Mailer and Jones's personal relationship adds dimension to the comparison of these texts; in life as in their novels, Mailer and Jones themselves lived violently and loudly, forming a friendship precipitated by sudden literary fame and marked by arrogance, jealousy, and love.

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I am also indebted to my support system of friends and family. Especially my mother, who, by leaving an old copy of *Catch-22* at the eye-level of a fifth-grader, is responsible for my interest in narratives of war.

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To Jim, From Brother Norm

Norman Mailer didn't meet James Jones until 1952. Mailer was only 29, but he was fresh off the success of *The Naked and the Dead* (which was already being hailed as *the* novel to come out of World War II) and already in possession of massive ego. Years later, Mailer described their early rivalry: "James Jones and I used to feel in the early 1950s that we were the two best writers around. Unspoken was the feeling that there was room for only one of us. I remember that Jones inscribed my copy of *From Here to Eternity* 'For Norman, my dearest enemy, my most feared friend.'"[1] Jones's new book, *From Here to Eternity,* threatened to move in on Mailer's literary territory. It approached many of the same themes as Mailer's 700-page behemoth and it did so with ample use of profanity, violence, and realism. Jones was also a hero—he'd seen heavy action on Guadalcanal with the 25th Division ("Tropic Lightning"), where Mailer had been relegated to the fringes of the Pacific war, assigned to mop up the Philippines with the 112th Infantry Unit. Lack of experience was a particular insecurity of Mailer's, and one he already felt contributed to the flaws of *The Naked and the Dead.*

There were other differences between them, too, but when they finally met, none of those things seemed to matter. Mailer—a tightly wound Jewish intellectual—suddenly found himself on a cultural collision path with James Jones, a bombastic and relatively uneducated Midwesterner. Despite their differences, the pair bonded immediately. They fought, they boozed, traveled the United States on a long peyote trip, complimented one another outrageously, and fought again.[2] Each possessed an acute sense of the other's giant literary talent, and by the late 50s, they had cemented their combative friendship for life. They confided in one another often,

[1] Norman Mailer, "Dearest enemies, most feared friends" (*The Telegraph*, 2003).
[2] Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 156-8.

their decades-long correspondence tracing the story of a unique relationship. In 1955, Mailer wrote:

> March 7
> Dear Jim,
> Just a note. I was just thinking of *Eternity* and all the wise beautiful subtle things in it underneath the noise, and I thought what the hell I might as well tell you. I've got a little idea of how hard it is for you to work at times, but it seemed to please you once when I told you I thought you were every bit a writer, and so I say it again. Every fucking pulse in you is a writer, and no matter how hard it comes, and how slow, nothing will stop you till you croak, although maybe you got to relax now and again sort of.
> Anyway, just to tell you I love you a little, you fucking bully. Tell Lowney I'll write her a good letter one of these days.
> And don't bother to answer this.
> Brother Norm [3]

Unable to resist a quick jab ("underneath the noise" being a bit pejorative), "Brother Norm" nonetheless expresses a deep admiration for Jones's literary talent. They frequently discussed their artistic destinies, the tone of the letters ranging from mutual admiration to coldness throughout the years. During one argument, Jones wrote rather testily to Mailer:

> March 5, 1956
> Dear Norm,
> First, let me make it plain that I haven't any intention of engaging in a feud with you. Literary or personal. And never have had. My opinion of you has undergone some changes, but – it isn't unprintable (in the sense you use the word). Someday, if you like, maybe we'll be able to sit down and discuss the whole thing, though it would probably be a waste of time. I've not said anything about you to anyone that I wouldn't say to your face; but I don't want to go into it in a letter. Anyway, I'm sure my opinion of you is of no more interest to you than what you think of me would-be to me. We both have our work to do, our paths to follow, and they appear to be increasingly divergent. But that doesn't mean anything and I agree with you that it would be ridiculous for us to become enemies. And I never intended that we should. So set your mind at rest on that point.[4]

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[3] Norman Mailer, *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer* (New York, Random House, 2014) March 7 1955. "137. To James Jones."
[4] Correspondence from James Jones to Norman Mailer, 5 March 1956, Box 54.6, James Jones Papers 1890-1981, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Jones's sense that his path and Mailer's would diverge wasn't entirely incorrect. Though history often compares them, they write about the war in stylistically and thematically distinct terms. Despite both novelists' conviction that they constituted two of the only "real" writers left, their books were in reality quite different, though each successful in its way.[5] For this thesis, I have chosen to study the relationship between Mailer's and Jones's greatest works, both because of their authors' relationship as cultural contemporaries and because of similar content matter of their books. Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and Jones's *The Thin Red Line*—each regarded as the pinnacle of their authors' literary achievements—are urgent, profane, and shattering portraits of combat in the Pacific Theater. They are obsessed with sex and manhood and reject the heroic narratives of many of their contemporaries. But they are also very different books, and comparing them draws out the opposing ideologies their writers.

The Naked and the Dead is Mailer's only enduring war novel, but *The Thin Red Line* is one of several written by Jones that received high accolades. I chose to study *The Thin Red Line* because it contains the most combat scenes of any of Jones's novels—it was, as one 1962 newspaper ad put it, the combat novel the world had been waiting for Jones to write.[6] Jones and Mailer, both veterans of the war in the Pacific, write from a perspective of military experience, imbuing their novels with what critics of the day often called "honesty." But the books are triumphs of "realism" primarily because they devote such careful attention to the inhumanity of the Pacific theater.[7] Though Jones and Mailer treat the root and manifestations of man's savagery differently, they are equally fascinated by the darkness of war and the atrocities committed by American soldiers in the name of duty.

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[5] Mailer, *Selected Letters,* footnote 143, "May 3, 1955."
[6] Newspaper ad, Box 68, Series II. Correspondence, 1959-81(Paris and Later) 1962, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
[7] David Dempsey, "The Dusty Answer of Modern War" (*The New York Times*, May 1948).

By close reading for savagery in *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Thin Red Line*, I will demonstrate both the common ground and the irreconcilable differences between the novels' themes and their authors. The tales Mailer and Jones weave, within the pages of their books and in their own lives, tell a story of humanity that is equal parts redemptive and devastating. At the center of their stories is the Pacific, and the struggle for humanity there that they recall with such careful attention.

Defining Savagery

Defining savagery in wartime presents a unique dilemma. At first glance, "savagery" appears synonymous with related terms such as "war crimes" or "atrocity." But upon closer examination, these terms do not contain the nuance required to fully describe the conduct of American soldiers in the Pacific War. The modern concept of "war crimes" did not enter the international consciousness until the Hague Conventions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even then the laws of war cannot indict a soldier for enjoying the sensation of killing (the act of killing itself being required by war).[8] And yet, Mailer and Jones, by inviting us into their characters' darkest moments of violent pleasure, impress on the reader the wrongness of these sensations. Atrocities in war are the result of savagery, but do not capture the quality of the perpetrators that commit them.

Savagery—itself deriving from the Latin *silva,* meaning "woods," and eventually *silvaticus, "*of the woods"—is less clinical than "war crimes" or "atrocity." It is, paradoxically, a word whose etymology implies an animal aspect of men, when in fact it seems to describe the opposite. In war, savagery describes the uniquely human aspect of violence—it illustrates

[8] H. McCoubrey, "The Concept and Treatment of War Crimes" (*Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 1,2, 1996), 121–39.

sophistication rather than wildness. Savagery is the ability to recognize another's humanity, and commit atrocity nonetheless. It requires, beyond base animal instinct, emotional awareness, the evolved mind all humans possess, and a capacity for violence that seems to also be the inheritance of war. The coexistence of savagery and war is perhaps the main contradiction of this thesis: how can war, which demands and sanctions the unthinkable, produce degrees of violence, and how can one distinguish between duty and excess on the battlefield?

Neither Mailer or Jones answer this question; in fact, their works make clear that there can be no comprehensive answer to a question that condones some acts of violence but rejects others almost arbitrarily. In "Battle Trauma and the NATO Problem," Paul Fussell writes, "[Soldiering] is all mass-criminality, even if interested parties insist on significant degrees of difference."[9] War, Fussell argues, is the name given to violence to make it "just"; justified violence is itself a delusion created by those who participate in it.[10] In his book *The Face of Battle*, John Keegan nonetheless advocates for the utility of "narrative" in war—moral codes, he argues, are necessary to the practice of war because they create the structure and "procedure" required to wage a successful campaign.[11] In the same chapter, though, Keegan also points out that soldiers remember war not as the large-scale efforts of power structures and procedure, but as an intensely personal experience, dictated by day-to-day events and small groups of soldiers. This is the war Mailer and Jones remember—a claustrophobic affair conducted on small islands, where violence is close-up and high-def.

These authors, by reproducing violence in vivid scenes, invite readers to seek out the line between propriety and impropriety. Though Fussell and Keegan have argued there can be no true

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[9] Paul Fussell, "Battle Trauma and the NATO Problem," *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 246.
[10] Ibid., 249.
[11] John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (Penguin Books, 1976), 49-50.

definition of savagery in war, Mailer and Jones gesture at its shape: savagery lives in the minds of soldiers who find pleasure in the act of killing, in the act of violence that clearly exceeds "minimum necessary force," and in the practice of war itself.[12]

Reading For Savagery

The best introduction to understanding savagery in *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Thin Red Line* is to experience it directly. This, after all, is what Mailer and Jones hope to achieve with their gleefully descriptive language. Savagery in these books comes in measures of "organs…pulsing busily away"[13] and "intestines…bunched out in a thick white cluster like the congested petals of a sea flower."[14] Sometimes the authors paralyze readers with the suddenness of violence; at other times, a sleepily mounting dread intensifies as the moment of horror approaches. Jones in particular has the disconcerting habit of making savagery funny. In *The Thin Red Line*, for example, one Japanese prisoner receives special care from the American troops.

> Queen stared down at the Japanese man, then shrugged and grinned ruefully. "Okay. I guess you're right," he said goodnaturedly. "It looks like we carry him." He slapped his great palms together. "All right then! Come on! I'll take a leg! Who wants the rest of him?" Storm, who wisely had already considered this problem, too, and decided he preferred vomit to feces, moved over to him and took an arm. Two of the other wounded got hold of the other arm and leg, and with Queen comically in command and calling the movements for them like a coxswain of a crew shell hollering "Stroke!", the party moved off down the trail again. Queen's goodnatured surrender to wisdom, plus his comical commands about portaging the sick Japanese, had put them all back into the high humor of their departure. Whooping and hollering they descended the steep hillside in a sort of nonsensical hysteria of cruel fun, slipping and sliding, one or another of them falling from time to time, and all of them except the four portagers who had all they could

[12]Ibid., 48.
[13] James Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 239. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
[14] Mailer, Norman. *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1948), 210. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

> take care of, booting or shoving their seven walking prisoners to make them keep up (370-1).

Disgusted and amused by the vomit and diarrhea "squirting as they bobbled him along the steep hillside," the soldiers carrying the prisoner bash naked prisoner's head against each rock they encounter.

> "Let's bump him a little," he said as they came to a rock. "Maybe we can knock the shit out of him, hunh? Or, at least, enough of it to make him stop till we get him down." Swinging him in unison, they bumped his behind against the rock and made him squirt, all of them laughing uproariously. The other Japanese bobbed and grinned, because they too had gotten the idea by now. Nevertheless, the bumping did little good. He kept right on squirting as they continued to carry him down. Conscious enough to blink his open eyes from time to time, he was too far gone, too near out, to control his bowels, and when his head hit the ground from time to time it did not even make him flinch. They would bump him against every rock they came to as they went on down, and then go on (371-2).

The scene is one of the most cheerfully sadistic in *The Thin Red Line*; Jones describes in detail the prisoner's odor, the liquid spilling from his orifices in "squirts" (a word better suited for a water park than bodily functions) and the "uproarious" laughter of the American troops, who find hilarity in the image of the Japanese prisoner bouncing from rock to rock. The actions of the troops clearly amount to savagery; their abuse of the prisoner goes far beyond the call of duty, which only requires the prisoners be returned to headquarters. Instead, the transport becomes a brutal game—a "nonsensical hysteria of cruel fun"—that is both humorous and horrifying to behold. The passage utilizes one of Jones's most interesting and distinctive literary tools: his tendency to characterize the worst scenes of violence with comic imagery. The resulting effect is one of dark parody—Jones depicts extreme violence with the conventions of physical comedy. The resulting scenes, which are warped reflections of popular 1940s slapstick acts like the Three Stooges or Abbot and Costello, blend the high and the low with the humorous and the revolting. American soldiers bear a broken Japanese body through though woods on a

stretcher that resembles a crew shell, evoking images of upper-class rowing regattas, but carry the body while "whooping and sliding" as the Japanese prisoner bangs from rock to rock like a lifeless doll. The crude contrast of the flopping body—which plays off of physical comedy's reliance on exaggeration of the ordinary to produce comic effects—to the image of a regatta renders the situation highly ridiculous.[15] Jones makes a point about the presence of savagery in war: extreme violence is both commonplace and impossible to bear without the manifestation of defense mechanisms like irony, parody, and humor. In Jones's case, humor both exaggerates the absurdity of violating so-called social conventions in war and masks the horrible reality of prisoner abuse. And Jones suggests there may be something inherently joyous about savagery—an exhilarating, laughter-inducing quality that he plays up through the absurdity of his regatta scene but also considers important, as violent comedy recurs throughout the novel.

In contrast, *The Naked and the Dead* contains little humor, and Mailer gives no visible indication that he finds war funny in the least. Rather, Mailer's most violent scenes are darkly psychological, offering running commentary on each character's most secret moments. This is the narrative technique Mailer uses at one of the most important moments of savagery in *The Naked and the Dead*—one that reveals Mailer's chief narrative tools for describing savagery and places the novel in stark contrast with *The Thin Red Line*. The scene describes the death of a small bird crushed in the fist of Croft, a barbaric Texan who seizes power in a platoon during a long recon mission across the fictional island of Anopopei.

The scene is an exhibit of the warring personalities and aggression fostered by the platoon's peculiar social organization. It begins with Roth, a sensitive Jewish soldier universally disliked by the rest of the platoon for his weakness, displaying the behavior that the others revile

[15] Günter Beck, "Slapstick Humor: Physical Comedy in Vonnegut's Fiction" (*Studies in American Humor* 20, 2012), 59–72.

him for: a combination of emotional vulnerability (an offense to the masculine code of the platoon) and whininess.

When Roth adopts the bird, holding it alongside him as others fashion a stretcher for the injured soldier Wilson, Roth falls deeply and immediately for the "tiny thing" (527). The bird takes on child-like characteristics, small and gentle in his grasp, and Roth becomes increasingly enamored with it:

> He fondled it, breathed its bouquet, examined its injured wing, filled with tenderness toward it. He felt exactly the same joy he knew when his child had plucked at the hairs on his chest. And back of it, not quite conscious, he was also enjoying the interest of the men who had crowded around him to look. For once he was the focus of attention. He could not have picked a worse time to antagonize Croft.
> Croft was sweating from the labor of making the stretcher; when he finished, all the difficulties of the patrol were nagging at him again. And deep within him his rage was alive again, flaring. Everything was wrong, and Roth played with a bird, while nearly half the platoon stood about watching.
> His anger was too vivid for him to think. He strode across the hollow, and stopped before the group around Roth.
> "Jus' what the hell you men think you're doin'?" he asked in a low strained voice.
> They all looked up, instantly wary.
> "Nothin'," one of them muttered.
> "Roth!"
> "Yes, Sergeant?" His voice quavered.
> "Give me that bird."
> Roth passed it to him, and Croft held it for a moment. He could feel the bird's heart beating like a pulse against his palm. Its tiny eyes darted about frantically, and Croft's anger worked into his fingertips. It would be the simplest thing to crush it in his hand; it was no bigger than a stone and yet it was alive. Strange impulses pressed through his nerves, along his muscles, like water forcing itself through fissures in a rock mass. He wavered between compassion for the bird and the thick lusting tension in his throat. He didn't know whether to smooth its soft feathers or mash it in his fingers, and the impulse, confused and powerful, shimmered in his brain like a card on edge about to fall.
> "Can I have it back, Sergeant?" Roth pleaded.
> The sound of his voice, already defeated, worked a spasm through Croft's fingers. He heard a little numbly the choked squeal of the bird, the sudden collapsing of its bones. It thrashed powerlessly against his palm, and the action aroused him to nausea and rage again. He felt himself hurling the bird away

> over the other side of the hollow, more than a hundred feet. His breath expelled itself powerfully; without realizing it, he had not inhaled for many seconds. The reaction left his knees trembling.
> For a long instant no one said anything (529-30).

The passage is visceral and breathtaking. Roth, deprived of his family, attaches emotionally to the wounded bird, seeking both the attention of the men and an outlet for his paternal instinct. Both of these responses are due to the social and physical isolation he experiences as a member of the platoon. As much as the bird is an outlet for his misguided paternal energy, the bird appears to also be an extension of Roth himself. Like Roth, the bird is weak and dependent on others for care.

Roth's resemblance to the bird makes Croft's ensuing savagery even more striking. The scene is distinctly sexual, from the rich sensory descriptions of bird's gentle heart beating a frantic pulse against the rough skin of Croft's palm to Croft's odd, pleasurable rage mounting as he wavers between "compassion" and "the thick lusting tension" in his throat. As anger "works into [Croft's] fingertips" and "strange impulses press through his nerves," Mailer evokes images of perverse arousal. In doing so, he emphasizes the common ground between sex and power in Croft's psyche—Croft wants to control Roth and can do so either by choosing to benevolently spare the bird or by "[mashing] it in his fingers." Ultimately, Croft cannot resist the most violent part of his nature—killing the bird offers a greater thrill and a more complete domination of Roth. The sound of Roth's "already defeated," pleading voice "works a spasm" through Croft's fingers, triggering an orgasmic response brought on by Roth's subjugation—he crushes the bird abruptly. The bird's body collapses in Croft's palm and as it utters a "choked squeal," Croft releases his breath, left trembling by the intensity of the killing. For the next few beats Croft is shocked into almost post-coital lethargy, "mumbling" and "passive" as disorder ensues.

Mailer's decision to paint the scene as an act of sexual violence against Roth is an important moment. It solidifies the suspicion that Croft is savage by nature rather than by circumstance, bringing to front one of the main claims Mailer makes in *The Naked and the Dead:* sometimes, man is savage just because it feels good.

For a combat novel, *The Naked and the Dead* contains relatively few scenes of actual violence. When savagery occurs, it is often in the aftermath of death—in the looting of bodies and desecration of corpses, or in the private thoughts of a man who has killed for self-defense, but feels a "twitch of pleasure" (153) at the sensation. In this scene, though, the savagery is both active and deeply affecting, though it is directed at an animal rather than another human. Here, the impact of Croft's violence is symbolic, hurting Roth disproportionately and creating a rift in the platoon.

Red—a more assertive personality in the platoon—names the violence for what it is: a gratuitous display of power, designed to assert authority amidst the shifting group dynamic. Red begins a confrontation: "Red moved more slowly, more deliberately. The hostility between him and Croft had to come to an issue sooner or later […] 'What's the matter, Croft, you throwing orders around to save your ass?'" (531) Though Lieutenant Hearn, the nominal leader of the group, breaks up the argument, Croft clearly regards himself as the true authority in the platoon: the one who has "molded" it, creating the strange social dynamic that now rules the men. Hearn forces Croft to apologize, but Croft does so only out of a faint recognition of the fact that if he kills Hearn for the insult he will destroy the fragile order he created in the platoon. The incident sours the platoon and ends in Hearn making the decision to split the group into even smaller units in order to transport a wounded member more quickly to safety. As the group fractures, so do conventional social norms. In the aftermath, Roth's loneliness intensifies:

> He was alone. It gave him a bitter pleasure, as if in having plumbed this last rejection he knew at last that there was no further humiliation he could receive. The foundation stones of his despair were at least stones (576).

The description of the bird's death by Croft's hand and the following crisis of leadership also gives readers a comprehensive survey of Mailer's style: he is graphic, intensely psychological, and concerned with the minute details of savagery. Most importantly, he places the burden of blame for soldiers' violence on the individuals who commit the act. Mailer clearly portrays Croft's violence towards the bird as a function only of power-lust and spite—he makes no attempt to excuse the savagery or explain its origin as anything other than the outcome of Croft's basically savage nature.

These passages also illustrate the chief differences between Mailer and Jones. Mailer seeks out man's worst nature, while Jones takes a more matter-of-fact approach to savagery—in *The Thin Red Line*, atrocious violence coexists with brotherhood and heroism. In the following thesis, I will read *The Thin Red Line* and *The Naked and the Dead* in an attempt to place their authors' personal histories in context with the content of the novels. My primary objective is to draw out the tensions between these various interpretations of savagery and ultimately to understand what conclusions, if any, can be made about the status of American savagery in the fiction of the Pacific War.

The Thin Red Line*: "A Nonsensical Hysteria of Cruel Fun*"

James Jones published *The Thin Red Line* in 1962, the second book in a trilogy about World War II. The novel came forth on unsteady ground, after the resounding success of the trilogy's first installment, *From Here to Eternity* (1951) and the critical failure of *Some Came Running* (1957). But *The Thin Red Line*, with its intense combat scenes and unflinching profanity, received generally positive reviews. In the decades after its publication, *The Thin Red*

Line revealed its staying power, becoming one of the most prominent war novels of its kind. Paul Fussell, in his 1989 book *Wartime,* saw Jones's writing as "the antidote to…postwar high-mindedness" and "the best" amongst other literary heavyweights of Jones's generation.[16]

Jones's brutish realism and blue-collar quality resonated with readers. Norman Mailer once said that Jones had "the wisdom of an elegant redneck."[17] But Jones's style also invited questions about the subtlety of *The Thin Red Line*. A New York Times review by James Aldridge, published in 1978 (about a year after Jones's death), remarked that Jones's work for the most part contained "no discernable edge of irony" in its "leaden insights" on the common soldier.[18] The writer questions Jones's own understanding of the themes evident in *The Thin Red Line*, ultimately judging the novel a worthy addition to the American canon of war novels but curiously lacking in self-awareness. Others argue the opposite: in his book *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity,* Tony Williams pieces together a more nuanced view of Jones, a man who has been awarded the diminishing title "big tough he-man war-story writer."[19] Williams sees an author who, rather than upholding traditional roles of masculinity in war, challenged convention and transcended his earlier works in *The Thin Red Line.*

And for what it's worth, Jones himself had words for those who attacked his style. Writing to a friend, he snarked:

> I wouldn't complain about the review. Naturally I've grown too tired to be irritated any more by people say [sic] I don't write well stylistically, punctuation, etc. I just sometimes wish they had some concept of what I try to do with syllabic

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[16] Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 180.
[17] Carter Graydon, "Fame and Infamy" (*The New York Times*, October 17, 2013).
[18] John Aldridge, "The Last James Jones" (*The New York Times*, March 5, 1978).
[19] Tony Williams, *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity (*Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), x. In Response to "Sunday Allergy," a short story about "sexual dysfunction in a material society," an editor responded, "My God, Jim. We can't go around publishing stories like that by you. You're supposed to be a big tough he-man war-story writer. Send me a war story."

> rhythms, rhythmic emphasis, choice of words. Where do they think all that emotion comes from in my writing? Luck?[20]

If mere echoes of Norman Mailer exist between the lines of *The Naked and the Dead,* James Jones is an undeniable presence in *The Thin Red Line.* In the bleak last lines of the book the narrator intones, "One day one of their number would write a book about all this, but none of them would believe it, because none of them would remember it that way" (510). This style is characteristic of *The Thin Red Line*; the novel is blunt, both in style and its critical take on the war in the Pacific. Where Mailer layers his distaste for savagery under psychological profiles of his characters, the men of C-for-Charlie express their distaste for the machine of war in fewer words, but with no less art on Jones's part. Though the novel is at times overly sentimental, it is a valuable resource for understanding how veterans conceived of violence, as the similarities between the experiences of the fictional C-for-Charlie company and Jones's own combat experience as corporal in 25th Infantry Division "Tropic Lightning" do seem to blur the line between history and fiction.

In his article "James Jones on Guadalcanal," Robert Blaskiewicz acknowledges the temptation to draw conclusions about Jones based on the parallels between his own combat experience and the content of the novel. "In a way, the desire to connect *The Thin Red Line* to Jones's personal experiences is understandable," he writes. "Unfortunately, the account of his service on Guadalcanal changes with each telling, and this confusion has caused problems for scholars exploring the links between Jones's service and his novel."[21] Blaskiewicz makes a fair point; some of the similarities between recorded history and the novel are irrefutable, while

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[20] Correspondence from James Jones to "Herm," Box 68.19 Series II, Correspondence, 1959-81(Paris and Later) 1962, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
[21] Robert Blaskiewicz, "James Jones on Guadalcanal" (*International Journal of the Humanities.* 20-1,2, 2008), 1.

others, now obscured by the almost mythological status of the novel and Jones himself, remain uncertain in origin. Like clerk-turned-Cpl. Fife in *The Thin Red Line*, Jones was ultimately evacuated from Guadalcanal due to an old ankle injury; this much is fact. But the scene often recognized as the most iconic autobiographical moment in *The Thin Red Line* is now also subject to scrutiny. Did Jones, like his character Bead, really slay a Japanese soldier who surprised him while he was defecating alone in the woods? The scene conveys desperate intensity and is possibly one the most memorable from the novel. Blaskiewicz and others urge readers not to draw conclusions about Jones too readily despite the temptation given Jones's known history. Did Jones really replicate his struggle in exact, nauseating language through Bead? How should readers interpret Jones's perspective on violence if *The Thin Red Line* is, in fact, partially autobiographical?

Like *The Thin Red Line,* Jones's personal accounts—and others' interpretations of him—are confused, emotional, and fragmented. He is a man whose wife described him as "born gentle" and who became "such a pacifist" after the war.[22] But he was also a man who "cheerfully" dedicated *The Thin Red Line* itself, "to those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavors, WAR and WARFARE, may they never cease to give us the pleasure, excitement, and adrenal stimulation that we need."[23] The notion of dedicating the novel—a nightmare of violence, heat, and madness—to war itself is of course bitterly sarcastic, but its content suggests that even if Jones is a pacifist, the language of his dedication is not entirely incorrect. Jones's violence is lush, sexual, and invigorating as much as it is numbing and horrible. Jones embraces these contradictions, providing a more complex account of war than critics of his time believed.

[22] Blaskiewicz, "James Jones on Guadalcanal," 8.
[23] Jones, *Thin Red Line,* dedication page.

Cynicism and Numbness

The memorable scene in which American soldiers bear an ill Japanese prisoner back to headquarters brings to light another of Jones's main concerns: cynicism as a companion to savagery. After the scene, which depicts the hilarity of "jets of yellow liquid the nude Japanese kept squirting as they bobbled him along down the steep hillside" and the fun of "[bumping] him against every rock they came to as they went on down" (372), Storm, a participant in the act, must reckon with his actions. He thinks afterwards that maybe participation in savagery is the simple result of the loss of innocence; "numbed" to acts of savagery by combat, he faces the "possibility that maybe he [isn't] so decent after all" (372). This is one of the central concerns of the novel: that each man is not brave enough—not decent enough—to wage a "good" war. Characters face pressure to engage in acts of violence to appear masculine and yet risk losing their humanity if they cross some unmarked line. Awareness of this contradiction, which many characters in C-for-Charlie achieve, results in bitterness, numbness, and an increased capacity for savagery itself. As Storm realizes, the only "sane" thing to do is to "get out of the fucking combat zone" (372).

For Jones, expressions of savagery and cynicism often go hand in hand. But before examining how cynicism manifests as violence on the battlefield, readers must first understand Jones's relationship to the individual. Though the novel has no clear protagonist, certain characters act as Jones's direct mouthpieces. Williams theorizes in *James Jones: From Here to Eternity* that these characters, who are almost always the reader's most direct line to Jones, are both semi-autobiographical and carry-overs from Jones' other books. For instance, Witt appears to be a warped reincarnation of *From Here to Eternity's* "Prewitt," part of a meta character arc

spanning multiple novels.[24] Others, including Bell, Fife, and Bead, mirror Jones's real-life experiences in the military, from Fife's ankle injury to Bead's killing of the Japanese soldiers in the woods. These characters are Jones's mouthpieces for a reason—they narrate the details of life in C-for-Charlie through a lens of Jones's own experiences. They are also often the ones to offer direct insight into Jones's opinion on military authoritarianism.

For instance, in the middle of a raid, Bell suddenly realizes that if he manages to kill or be killed, the resulting death is "by accident; slain not as an individual but by sheer statistical probability, by the calculated chance of searching fire, even as he himself might be at any moment. Mathematics! Mathematics! Algebra! Geometry!" (196) Bell begins to see himself as an insignificant number, divorced from the heroics of war and used by the army for cannon fodder. Other characters echo this sentiment many times over. Fife arrives at the impression "of its all being like a business. A regular business venture, not war at all. The idea was horrifying to Fife. It was weird and wacky and somehow insane. It was even immoral. It was as though a clerical, mathematical equation had been worked out…" (39) Jones's tactic of inhabiting the collective consciousness of C-for-Charlie produces a striking effect; by magnifying individuals' reactions to the realization they are disposable, he conveys the universality of this emotion among the members of the company. And of course, by anthropomorphizing "C-for-Charlie," as he does over the course of the novel, Jones succeeds in stripping the members of the company of their individuality. The characters fade away one by one, their identity as members of C-for-Charlie slowly subsumed by death and the arrival of new bodies to occupy the spaces left by casualties. "The remainder, filled up almost to capacity with new green men, was not at all the C-for-Charlie which had once landed on this island," Jones writes at the end of the novel. "It was a

[24] Williams, *Limits of Eternity,* 101.

totally different organization, with a different feel altogether now"(506). The realization that one is a replaceable part—an intensely personal experience for most men in the book—seems ironically universal.

In some ways, C-for-Charlie takes on the function of a chorus; like the tragic choruses of Greek drama, C-for-Charlie most resembles a "collective character" that serves as the intermediary between the reader and the more memorable individuals in the book.[25] The homogenization of the Company is both practical, allowing Jones to describe its movements across the island, and performative—C-for-Charlie loudly echoes the woes of the characters Jones returns to again and again, magnifying the sentiments of the Fifes, the Bells, the Storms, and the Witts of the company. Jones navigates this relationship neatly, salvaging the metaphor of C-for-Charlie as both identity-erasing and identity-enlarging. As Williams writes, the "monosyllabic, pared-down surnames" given to each member of the company represent "the basic nature of the combatant," giving special care to the "collective idea of the military unit."[26] Williams refers to the "Company Roster" included before the table of contents, which lists the names of soldiers in short, alphabetized lines: "Ash, Bell, Carni, Catch, Catt, Coombs, Crown…"[27] There is a distinct rhythm to the roster, and with it a sense of drama: the roster serves as a sort of "cast of characters" ultimately boiled down to just "C-for-Charlie." The company's universal sense of lost identity becomes important to understanding the relationship between violence and cynicism. As Williams notes, the soldiers become increasingly aware that

[25] Weiner, Albert. "The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus" (*Theatre Journal* 32, 2, 1980), 205.
[26] Williams, *Limits of Eternity,* 95.
[27] Jones, *Thin Red Line,* "Company Roster."

they are "government-issued items of property soon to be used as pawns in a bloody chess game."[28]

Cynicism itself manifests over time. When C-for-Charlie first arrives on Guadalcanal, they are green; it's not until after the company sees real action that "the true imprisonment of combat [reaches] the newly blooded veterans of C-for-Charlie" (355). It is at this point that "a new element darkled in their already darkling mood: a somber, deep-rooted bitterness which would grow and grow until it would make of them—those who survived—the tough, mean, totally cynical infantry fighters which their leaders fondly on sentimental grounds already believed they were, and which all of them, everybody, hated the Japanese for being" (356).

Feelings of disenfranchisement and bitterness towards authority are what enable Corporal Fife, formerly a clerk, to make his first kill. He remembers a younger version of himself—"young, foolish, innocent, gullible Corporal Fife, that total stranger, who once had stood forth in the dawn on Hill 209 and had stretched out his arms willing to be killed for mankind, and the love of mankind" (451)—with disgust. "Well, fuck mankind, that bunch of 'honorable' animals" (452). Shortly following this expression of cynicism, Fife kills several Japanese soldiers and reacts at first with mingled joy and horror, dumbfounded that he is capable of performing his duty as a soldier.

The cynicism described by Jones as dehumanizing and violence-enabling seems closely related to what he describes as "battle-numbness," yet another trigger for savagery in *The Thin Red Line*. Storm, for instance, in part attributes his loss of decency to the ease with which numbness overcomes him; the numbness itself is a product of both combat experience and "deep-rooted bitterness" (356). The word "numb," which Jones uses frequently, often has the

[28] Williams, *Limits of Eternity,* 97.

peculiar connotation of meaning the opposite of its conventional definition. Numbness in *The Thin Red Line* occurs in moments of overstimulation, like "the olfactory numbness caused by the saturation of breath, feet, armpits and crotches below in the hold" (2) or the "numbness" induced by battle, which is in fact characterized by "orgy" and "madness" (465). Overwhelmed by sensation, soldiers retreat into the "starry eyed" domain of combat numbness, a condition that can plague soldiers for days after combat and often results in heightened savagery and detachment (465). Some scholars note the distinction between Mailer and Jones's descriptions of this sort of detachment; where Mailer attributes the ability to detach to man's inherent wickedness, Jones regards "combat numbness" more sympathetically, a consequence of war's cruelty.[29] Whatever the case, both authors regard the ability to detach as key to the ability to commit atrocities, a theme explored in depth by Jones throughout *The Thin Red Line.*

Jones's "combat numbness" appears similar to what American psychiatry recognized as "shell shock" during the war and what modern day audiences might call PTSD.[30] In *The Thin Red Line*, combat numbness allows soldiers to dissociate from combat, rendering characters able to navigate their violent realities without fully confronting the emotional reality of savagery. Jones demonstrates the effects and aftershocks of battle numbness as violence climaxes. For instance, when Fife realizes that battle numbness he acquired after seeing combat has finally receded, he reacts violently to new danger:

> He had never believed that he could be terrified by any of these puny piddling little air raids again, but he was. And Doll obviously was not. Fife had thought the combat numbness was a new state of mind. And when it went away and left him again a quivering mass of jelly, he was not prepared […] He was forced to

[29] Tobey Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (Routledge, 1992), 97-8.
[30] MA Crocq and L Crocq, "From shell shock and war neurosis to posttraumatic stress disorder: a history of psychotraumatology" (*Dialogues in clinical neuroscience* 2,1, 2000), 47-55.

> face up once again to the same old fact he had always known. He was a coward (496).

In this passage, Jones emphasizes two important features of battle numbness. First, Fife realizes with dismay that battle numbness is temporary and that he must eventually reckon with the consequences of exposure to combat. And secondly, Jones makes clear the idea that battle numbness induces a false sense of courage or inures soldiers to fear. Without constant proximity to combat, soldiers like Fife are prone to fall back into normal responses to danger. Jones reiterates this point as the men travel back through the landscape they fought their way across: "The march back, over that terrain where they had lain so long in such fear and trembling the last two days, and which now was so peaceful, was strange to everyone. And they all felt a bit numb" (349). At the height of their battle numbness, soldiers are able to disassociate from the reality of war. That which appeared frightening before combat now provokes little reaction from the soldiers. In the wake of battle, combat numbness seems to act as a temporary insulator against the intense emotions of surviving battle. And yet, Jones makes a direct connection between combat numbness and a willingness to engage in savagery. He begins with an observation about the loss of battle numbness in the days following the battle:

> It was interesting to watch the gradual diminution of the universal numbness, which afflicted everyone. In most of them the numbness required about two days to go away. By the third day nearly all of them had become almost the same personalities they had been before (350).

The disappearance of battle numbness is key to Bell's recognition that it is this ability to detach that allows the members of C-for-Charlie to participate in war:

> They could pretend to each other that they were men. And avoid admitting they had once seen something animal within themselves that terrified them. But then, most of them were doing that right now. Already. Including him. Bell had to laugh, and then was terrified because he had. At any rate, it was those first two days of numbness which set the pattern for the entire week of "rest."

At this moment, Bell realizes that battle numbness allows him and others like him in the company to excuse acts of savagery in the heat of battle. Bell feels intense guilt at this notion, but Jones appears to take a gentler view of soldiers in the grip of battle numbness. The condition is involuntary, a berserker-like haze that consumes C-for-Charlie. Again, Jones returns to the idea that while men are capable of engaging in savage acts, they are the victims of circumstance; battle numbness affects soldiers only in intense scenes, and then it removes agency from its victims. Bell articulates the tragedy of battle numbness, noting that C-for-Charlie can "never really become the same again" (350).

Sex and Savagery

Another of Jones's preoccupations in *The Thin Red Line*, and a thread that unites its emotionally intense combat scenes, is sexuality. Violence to Jones is intensely sexual: arousal accompanies even the first scene of a maimed body ("…fresh blood was so very red, and gaping holes in bared flesh were such curious, strange sights. It was all obscene somehow" (46)). Violence is seducing, "testicletingling" (93), testosterone-flooding; even the landscape of Guadalcanal itself takes on a suggestive slant, with "meaty green leaves" (61), earth that is "slippery, slick with wet" (61), and "plants which dangled great fleshy red penises in their faces" (397). C-for-Charlie exists in a hyper-sexualized environment, sensation heightened by both the lack of traditional sexual partners and the over-stimulation caused by combat. Bell thinks to himself, and Jones narrates, with a hint of irony: "Could it be that all war was basically sexual? Not just in psych theory, but in fact, actually and emotionally? A sort of sexual perversion? Or a complex of sexual perversions? That would make a funny thesis and God help the race" (286). While Bell appears surprised by this revelation, evidence abounds that sexual arousal complements and even aids most instances of violence in the novel.

Recent scholarship supports the notion that the Pacific theater was "far from being a sexual vacuum. [It] was in fact a highly sexualized environment" informed by "race, sex, and power."[31] However, in the time of Jones's writing, and even now, the intersection between sex and violence on the front lines was often reduced to "situational sexuality"—behavior that occurs only when a person's usual sexual behavior is not possible. Though Jones does indulge this concept—central characters like Fife, Bead, Welsh, Doll, and others are depicted having sex, with protestations such as "I'm no queer, or nothing like that" (126)—his descriptions of violence itself as sexual take on a different tone. Jones concerns himself less with the appearance of homosexuality in the military and more with the close proximity of lust to savagery, a complicated issue bookended by the hormone-soaked intensity of combat and desperate longing for security. Though substantial literature exists about the psychological and biological relationship between arousal and violence, Jones, true to form, makes little attempt to dissect their marriage. Instead, he treats sexuality as a natural accompaniment to violence, its overwhelming presence in the novel a testament to how Jones saw it as a vital part of soldiering in the Pacific.

One of the first instances of savagery in *The Thin Red Line* occurs when a group of men from C-for-Charlie defile Japanese corpses soon after their arrival on Guadalcanal. "Swaggering impudently," the soldiers "boisterously desecrated the Japanese parts, laughing loudly, each trying to outbravado the other" (73). Bell, though distantly horrified by the festivities, thinks immediately of his wife Marty. He dreams of "the softness of her breasts" (74), of her scent, and imagines her revulsion at their actions. His first instinct is not of arousal but of tragic separation from his wife, a woman he associates with home and security. However, as the story progresses

[31]Sean Brawley and Chris Dixon, "Searching for Dorothy Lamour: War and Sex in the South Pacific, 1941-45" (*Australasian Journal of American Studies* 18,1, 1999), 4-5.

and Bell grows more distant emotionally and physically from Marty, the conflation between sex, violence, and the recollection his wife grows more confused. During a combat scene in the middle of the novel Bell reacts with excitement at the thought of a confrontation with the Japanese, only to have his "supreme callousness [smash] into his consciousness and [shake] him with a sense of horror at his own hardened brutality" (296) a moment later. "How would Marty like being married to this husband, when he finally did get home?" Bell wonders. "Ah, Marty!" (296) Alienated from his sense of self and from Marty, Bell's sense of paranoia and insecurity in his relationship increases; convinced that Marty is cheating on him, Bell nonetheless finds sexual release in the agony of their relationship amidst the chaos of battle on Guadalcanal. He "wonders if [the other soldiers'] reactions" are sexual too—"How to know?" he ponders (285). Jones never answers this question, but he allows Bell to speculate bluntly that war is sexual, perhaps a consequence of "no longer feeling human" (286).

Through Bell, Jones suggests that the "pleasure" soldiers exact from violence is due to the corruptive power of war—yet another example of how violence disturbs the natural order. Like many of the most difficult concepts he confronts, Jones neither makes Bell's revelation out to be particularly surprising nor an isolated incident; again, one of the strengths of the novel is its ability to convey the universality of an experience by using C-for-Charlie, rather than a single individual, as its central character. In various segments, the men of C-for-Charlie continue to experience what Jones alternately calls a "little thrilling" (298), an "explosion of pleasure" (282), an "ecstasy" (319), and "a mingled excitement and fear which was by no means entirely unpleasant" (301)—all synonymous with sexual arousal—as they gain more combat experience.

In the decades since Jones published *The Thin Red Line*, much has been made of the presence of sexuality in his work. Like Jones's "casual racism,"[32]the "obscenity" of *The Thin Red Line* made it controversial then and inspires debate even now. In a comparable case, publishers censored gay sex scenes in *From Here to Eternity* (from the same trilogy as *The Thin Red Line*), judging the material too shocking for American audiences; critics called Jones primitive, *The Thin Red Line* a "a seemingly uncontrolled barrage of violence, obscenity, squalor and savagery."[33] Modern audiences balk at Jones's overt sexism and disregard for women. And yet despite its faults, *The Thin Red Line* does not shy away from what Mailer only gestures at: that as Bell so artlessly declares, "All war is basically sexual."

Men as Animals

If any characters in *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Thin Red Line* invite comparison, they are Croft (of bird-crushing notoriety) and Charlie Dale. While both Mailer and Jones attribute savagery to external forces like racism or battle numbness, they each also acknowledge the dark possibility that men may be capable of savagery for no reason at all. In *The Naked and the Dead*, Croft commits acts of savagery because it is his nature to do so and because he enjoys it. Jones echoes this suspicion in the character of Charlie Dale, who is initially a cook for C-for-Charlie. Like Croft, Charlie Dale finds success in war, thriving to a degree others find disturbing. War reduces him to little more than an animal, a fear Jones refers to constantly. In this respect Croft and Charlie Dale differ—Croft unmistakably resembles a man, and Mailer does not absolve men of their ability to commit savage acts. Jones, in contrast, dehumanizes Dale, a soldier capable of savagery by his nature. Ultimately, Jones balks from man's capacity to commit

[32] Sandlin, Lee. "The Never-Ending War – for 30 Years, James Jones Wondered how You Come Back from Counting Yourself as Dead" (*Wall Street Journal,* 2014, Eastern edition).
[33] Lee, "The Never-Ending War."

savagery, distancing Charlie Dale from the remainder of the company as he comes to embody a perfect soldier by some accident of his animalistic behavior.

Charlie Dale is one of the few men in C-for-Company who seems to genuinely enjoy military life. Eager and unintelligent, Dale nonetheless possesses an affinity for violence that allows him to succeed, and he steadily advances in rank throughout the novel. Fife expresses disgust when Dale thrives under the burden of additional responsibilities:

> "[Fife] thought he had never seen such an unholy look on a human face. Perhaps Fife was a little jealous because he was so afraid himself. Certainly there wasn't any fear in Charlie Dale. His mouth hung open in a slack little grin, the bright and at the same time lowering eyes darting everywhere and filmed over with an unmistakable sheen of pleased self-satisfaction at all this attention he suddenly was getting (211).

Dale's "slack" mouth and glazed, "darting" eyes create a disturbing physical distance between the gentler Fife and animal Dale. But more importantly, Fife finds Dale's fearlessness unrecognizable. Fear is a central theme of Jones's novel; Jones reminds readers constantly that the soldiers live in terror, a stark contrast to the seasoned veterans their government expects them to become. Dale, who seeks out opportunities for advancement and doesn't fear combat, ironically most embodies the heroic archetype of the soldier out of all the men profiled from C-for-Charlie: he is the first to volunteer to perform dangerous acts that distinguish him as such in the skewed system of military advancement.

Jones plays off of this contradiction in most scenes involving Charlie Dale. When the company begins to go thirsty, it is Charlie Dale who speaks out for the group: "Curiously enough, it was little Charlie Dale the insensitive, rather than Bell or Don Doll, who voiced it for all of them in the assault group. Imaginative or not he was animal enough to know what his belly told him and be directed by it" (296). Jones suggests that Dale is effective in this and other survival situations because he is "brutalized" (301), promoted to sergeant not out of heroism or

intelligence but because he can wage war without emotional barriers or the enduring fear that paralyzes more humane members of the company. In the end, Dale's "animal mind" (226) allows him to act brutally and efficiently in a landscape unkind to humanity.

Dale represents the most obvious embodiment of animal savagery in *The Thin Red Line*, but throughout the novel other characters exhibit animal tendencies in combat scenes and when committing acts of violence. In a philosophical moment, Fife realizes with "massive horror" that "creatures who spoke a language, walked upright on two legs dressed in clothes, built cities, and claimed to be human beings could actually treat each other with such fiendish animal cruelty" (157).

It is worth noting that the "animal" roots of human violence are still a topic of hot debate in anthropological and evolutionary studies. Anthropologist Richard Wrangham claimed famously in his 1996 book *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* that humanity's capacity to wage war is a direct result of the biological programming of our primate ancestors, who also engage in organized same-species killings.[34] Others, like science writer John Horgan in his article "Quitting the Hominid Fight Club," remain unconvinced that war is a product of our animal roots; Horgan instead suggests that war as we understand it as a response to human culture and the emergence of in- and out-group same-species adversaries. Quoting archeologist Jonathan Haas, Horgan writes, "'It is only after the cultural foundations have been laid for distinguishing 'us' from 'them,'' Haas says, 'that raiding, killing and burning appear as a complex response to the external stress of environmental problems.'" Evolutionary biologist Marc Bekoff agrees, writing that "cruelty, violence and warlike behaviors in [animals other than

[34] John Horgan, "Quitting the Hominid Fight Club" (*Scientific American,* 2010).

humans] are extremely rare."[35] Clearly, the ability to commit "savage" acts in war, as they have been defined in this thesis, is a uniquely human affliction. In the Jones quote above, Fife claims the opposite even as Jones subverts his claims. Fife may believe that savagery manifests as "fiendish animal cruelty," but Jones reminds the reader constantly that war is above all an industry: a sophisticated process orchestrated by corporations (recall Fife's earlier realization that war most resembles "a business. A regular business venture, not war at all" (39)). As always, Jones resists easy interpretation, playing both sides of the argument against the middle. By characterizing moments of savagery as "animal," Jones requires readers to think more critically to discern that these scenes are actually ones that depict intentional cruelty—something animals seem to be incapable of.

Many men of C-for-Charlie experience a sense of "animal" regression at some point in the novel. When Bead kills a Japanese soldier while defecating in the woods, he emits an "animal scream" (171) he doesn't even recognize as his own. Bead proceeds to kill the man brutally in a half-disassociated state, his violence fueled by the shock of the encounter and the intimacy of the attack. His experience is similar to many of those in the company once they witness violence; after their first battle, the men reflect, "They could pretend to each other they were men. And avoid admitting they had once seen something animal within themselves that terrified them" (350). By focusing on man's capacity for animal behavior, Jones draws out an idea only hinted out in his depiction of Charlie Dale. Like when under the influence of battle numbness, the soldiers are less themselves when they retreat into an "animal" state, less aware of their savagery and more inclined to make displays of brutality. However, the designation of animal seems a thin excuse for the distinctly human acts of violence committed in the process of

[35] Marc Bekoff, "Humanlike Violence Is Extremely Rare in Other Animals" (*Huffington Post,* 2013).

waging war. Excepting characters like Charlie Dale, the men Jones focuses on inhabit this animal state only in moments of intense danger or emotion, turning "rabid" (423) when required by the military to perform acts of violence—an animal appearance, like humor, serves as a defense mechanism against the reality of savagery in war.

If Jones uses the term "animal" to characterize American troops as "rabid" predators, he also uses it to paint the Japanese as prey-like. For instance, the Japanese, curiously absent from the novel despite numerous combat scenes, often resemble wounded animals. One prisoner gazes at the American troops through "pain-dulled, animal eyes" (312); Jones implies that the prisoner's proximity to an animal state enables the American troops to more easily beat him. Later, Jones describes a prisoner as looking "more like some lower grade type of animal and really did not appear to be worth saving" (369). Again, an animal description accompanies and excuses the soldiers' decision to savage the prisoner.

In my upcoming discussion of race in *The Naked and the Dead,* I remark that Mailer both embraces and rejects the notion that dehumanizing the enemy made it easier for American troops to commit acts of savagery in the Pacific theater. In the end, Mailer seems to reject the proposition that American soldiers, because of racial difference, were incapable of viewing the enemy as human; to the contrary, I suggest that their ability to both recognize the enemy as human and still commit acts of savagery was an even greater indictment of man's capacity for evil. Jones never quite reaches the same conclusion in *The Thin Red Line*. By dehumanizing both the "enemy" and the American protagonists of the novel, Jones takes a step back from accusing men of evil; rather, he emphasizes the theme of war stripping men of agency.

Dark Humor

The most unusual and interesting feature of Jones's writing is, as I have already mentioned, the sense of humor with which he approaches war. The comical slant to many of his scenes is in high contrast to Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. While Mailer quotes Nietzsche and aspires to Tolstoy, Jones opens his novel with the sheet music to "Don't Monkey Around With Death," a song composed by Bell as he watches the defilement of a Japanese corpse. Some of the more memorable lines remind the reader:

Don't futz around with the Reaper,
He will only make you smell.
Have you got B O?
Then do not go Fiddling with that Scythe-man;
(optional break:)
Because…
(upbeat; pause)
Your best friend will not tell you;
Don't monkey around with death (77)

From the folksy lyrics to the "upbeat; pause," Jones seems to delight in macabre humor of death. For Jones, humor is perhaps the only way to confront unspeakable horror; many of his combat scenes take on an air of surreal hysteria. This tune, for instance, mirrors a television jingle or ad—a dissonance Jones returns to often in *The Thin Red Line* as he associates violence with working-class entertainment throughout the novel. The scene in which Queen and the others bear the wounded Japanese prisoner through the woods, bashing his head into every stone, is one of the most barbaric in the novel; nonetheless, the atmosphere of the scene is, once again, "a nonsensical hysteria of cruel fun" (371); the cartoonish image of the soldier spewing bodily fluids and the soldiers' constant laughter paints a lurid, carnival atmosphere, the reality of which is distorted through a lens of comedy.

It's the same uncomfortable tickle Jones employs in other combat scenes, where "a crazy sort of blood lust, like some sort of declared school holiday from all moral ethics" (328), descends on the men. When C-for-Charlie bursts into a Japanese bivouac area, Stein sees his "two platoons in small disorganized groups…shooting and killing Japanese in what appeared to be carload lots" (327). Moments later, he sees a Big Queen "advance upon a Japanese man who was grinning desperately with his hands high in the air, push a rifle which carried no bayonet to within an inch of the grinning face and shoot him in the nose. Stein could not help laughing. Especially at the thought of those widening eyes slowly crossing themselves in despair as they focused on the advancing muzzle. Harold Lloyd." Here Jones is explicit about his comic template: like a Harold Lloyd comedy from the silent film era, this violence is slapstick—but it is macabre slapstick, a parody of death (327-8). Similarly, Jones invokes Chaplin as C-for-Charlie begins its trek towards Dancing Elephant ("After their scrambling, sliding, falling trek down, jerky, too fast and out of time like an early Chaplin movie, their momentum carried them right on across" (133)) and football to describe the sound of a man kicking a Japanese prisoner in the ribs ("It sounded as though someone had just punted a football out of the hollow down the hill" (312)). Jones thrives on "comically impure travesty" to make a point, drawing from the commonplace to characterize the unconscionable (75).

Jones treats authority with a similar sense of humor. Though some officers are the inept villains of the novel—they are largely responsible, in Jones's eyes, for the suffering the men endure—they are also comic figures. Jones calls the Regimental Commander "The Great White Father," and Band "The Glory Hunter"—nicknames which are, on the surface, disparaging and childish, but which at second glance carry a dark connotation. Both the

Regimental Commander and Band are responsible at times for subjecting C-for-Charlie to combat for the sake of (as Band's nickname suggests) greater glory. Jones's condemnation of military leadership takes on the same tongue-in-cheek sarcasm as does his "Special Note" before the novel begins, explaining his adaptation of Guadalcanal's geography to include "The Dancing Elephant," "The Giant Boiled Shrimp," and "Boola Boola Village":

> To have used a completely made up island would have been to lose all of these special qualities which the name Guadalcanal evoked for my generation. Therefore I have taken the liberty of distorting the campaign and laying down smack in the middle of it a whole slab of nonexistent territory. And naturally, any resemblance to *anything* anywhere is certainly not intended.[36]

Jones's parodic disclaimer mocks the absurdity of the war novel's conceit—aware of his responsibility to tell some truth about war, he must nonetheless do so while insisting loudly that *all* is fiction. Mailer, in contrast, gives a conventional disclosure: "All characters and incidents in this novel are fictional, and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental."

To find the same liveliness in Mailer's novel is almost impossible. Mailer is concerned with the profound—he once wrote without irony that he was "a man obsessed with the urgency to be great, to be a great writer, leader, philosopher, seer, a God—what!"[37] Jones, meanwhile, embraces the crudeness of combat. Mailer once said of Jones, "He's really worth knowing. I've never come across anyone so intelligent and stupid, so penetrating and insensitive all in one."[38] The same might be said of *The Thin Red Line*.

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[36] Jones, *Thin Red Line*, "Special Note."
[37] Lennon, *Double Life,* 246.
[38] Ibid., 157

The Naked and the Dead*: "Odd Bitter Pleasure"*

The Naked and the Dead wasn't the first war novel Norman Mailer wrote. In 1934, he produced a book entitled "The Martian Invasion, A Story in Two Parts." Mailer was eleven. The novel was 35,000 words long. It was, as Mailer's biographer Michael Lennon notes, the beginning of Mailer's long dedication to the study of war.[39] Mailer felt it was his destiny to write a war novel and ached to follow in the footsteps of Hemingway. On the eve of the United States' entry into World War II, Mailer's thoughts were not of the fate of the nation but of his novel—one that had not yet even been fully conceived.

> I may as well confess that by December 8th or 9th of 1941, in the forty-eight hours after Pearl Harbor, while worthy young man were wondering where they could be of aid to the war effort, and practical young men were deciding which branch of the service was the surest for landing a safe commission, I was worrying darkly whether it would be more likely that a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific.[40]

It is clear from the novel's ponderous style and pages of social commentary that Mailer intended for *Naked* to be "great." When Mailer disembarked in the Philippines he began taking notes immediately. He took careful stock of his emotions the first time he saw Japanese corpses, and after hearing of a "mythic eight-day patrol undertaken by a 112th platoon across the upper Angat River in Leyte," Mailer requested to be transferred to a reconnaissance platoon. On the island Luzon, the idea for *Naked* took root.[41]

Race and Savagery

In a study of how veterans explain savagery, Norman Mailer stands out for his portrayal of racial contempt as factor that contributed to extreme violence. Most historians acknowledge that race played a factor in the extreme ferocity displayed by both American and Japanese troops

[39] Ibid., 16
[40] Ibid., 43
[41] Ibid., 70

in the Pacific theater, but *The Naked and the Dead* presents a unique take on racially motivated violence to suggest the absurdity of presenting such a simple explanation for savagery. Where many studies point to the ubiquitous practice of dehumanizing the enemy as a key explanation for why American troops were able to commit atrocities, Mailer takes a microscope to racism. In exploring the nuances of American prejudices from within a single platoon, Mailer's individual-based study of racial violence suggests that his characters *did* ultimately recognize the humanity of the racial other—and that this makes the ruthless violence of American troops even more reprehensible. The members of the platoon, unalike in class, race, and disposition, hate each other almost as much as they hate the largely absent enemy, but acknowledge each other and even the Japanese as human. This dynamic is countered by the constant presence of casual racism in the language, manner, and even inner thoughts of each character. Mailer's characters wield racial contempt as a shield to avoid the moral consequences of savagery, but most cannot escape the poison of guilt.

As a veteran himself, Mailer was uniquely poised to tackle American racism. He was a New York-born Jew, always uncertain about the place his religious heritage occupied in his life and writing, and any discussion of Mailer's take on race should certainly include the note that several of Mailer's Jewish characters—especially delicate Roth—seem to contain a certain autobiographical slant. It is through this lens that Mailer examines race at the micro-level, using the platoon to act out the intensely psychological drama of savagery and race. Broad historical surveys of racial attitudes towards the Japanese do not capture to the same degree the perilous contradictions of race that Mailer describes in *The Naked and the Dead.* They certainly cannot convey the horror of real savagery in combat: the surge of lazy hatred (towards the Japanese and

the very circumstances of war); the heat of killing; and the cold understanding that one has killed a human, not an animal.

Many regard the Pacific War as a race war at its core.[42] As noted, historical studies often evoke the familiar tune of ethnic hatred to explain the intensity of atrocities committed by troops. American soldiers plundered and maimed Japanese corpses because the enemy was an alienated breed, reproduced in propaganda to resemble a homogenous race of suicidal apes. There was truth to some of the propaganda—the Japanese did engage in mass suicides rather than surrender, a fact that bred intense fear and speculation amidst American troops. It was also true that the Japanese committed a range of atrocities—they tortured prisoners of war, forced women into sexual slavery, and conducted mass killings. Tales of their collective wickedness gave US troops a reason to hate the Japanese, and begin to explain the force of American desire for revenge. If, as one Marine Corps general remembered, "killing a Japanese was like killing a rattlesnake," then it did not seem strange to "to detach something comparable to the reptile's skin or rattles for the pleasure of the victorious combatant and the entertainment of his friends and relatives back home."[43]

At first read, Mailer's characters express the same sense of superiority over and rage towards the Japanese that many believe allowed American troops to commit atrocities on a massive scale. In one of the first scenes of the novel, the soldier Red thinks that "all islands [look] the same" (11), automatically grouping Anopopei with his broader conception of a homogenous Asiatic landscape. And when the platoon takes a Japanese prisoner, its reaction to

[42] John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (Pantheon, 1993).
[43] James Weingartner, "Trophies of War: U.S. Troops and the Mutilation of Japanese War Dead, 1941-1945" (*Pacific Historical Review* 61,1, 1992), 56.

finally encountering the racial other mirrors descriptions of how American troops often described the Japanese:

> Moreover, [Gallagher] was vacillating between irritability at the prisoner and a grudged compassion. "The dumb bastard sure is skinny," he said with the superior affection he might have used if he saw a mongrel dog shivering in the rain. But then immediately afterward he watched the last piece of chocolate disappear in the Jap's mouth, and he muttered angrily, "What a goddam pig he is" (194).

Gallagher's main feeling towards the Japanese prisoner is of contempt; he sees the enemy as a "goddam pig," a lazy and unsympathetic animal. But Gallagher's inner narrative also begins to address the difficulty of dehumanizing the enemy; he also sees the prisoner as a "skinny" mongrel dog, an image that is in direct contradiction to that of a pig and which is slightly more sympathetic in tone. Here, Mailer begins to get at the prevailing questions surrounding race in *Naked*: to what degree are the soldiers able to separate the Japanese, and the racial other in general, from their humanity?

Gallagher may succeed only partially in convincing himself that the Japanese prisoner is not human, but military command echoes his general sentiments throughout *The Naked and the Dead.* General Cummings regards Japanese military strategy as related to the race's deficiencies, telling Hearn that "They have that game of theirs, go, which is all feverish activity, all turning of flanks, and encirclements, and then when they fight they act like wounded animals who roar down clumsily when the flies become too goading" (166). In these encounters, Mailer's characters certainly seem to mirror the responses recorded by veterans in non-fiction and historical studies. American military leadership stressed the importance of Japanese viciousness and propensity for group sacrifice when planning offenses; American troops regularly breached codes of conduct when fighting the Japanese, primarily out of racial hatred, and were almost

never disciplined for doing so.[44] In his memoir *With the Old Breed,* Eugene Sledge remembers, "Our code of conduct toward the enemy differed drastically from that prevailing back at the division CP."[45]

Like Gallagher, most of Mailer's characters initially display a blasé sense of racial superiority and attempt to justify the practice of souvenir hunting by dehumanizing the Japanese. In one important scene, the platoon seeks bodies to plunder. The language of the search takes on the atmosphere of a hunt: the soldiers move quietly through the trees in darkness, catching the stink of decaying flesh on the air. Wilson notes that the exposed flesh of one corpse resembles "a shoulder o' lamb" (213). This scene contains some measure of realism. Official US Navy films referred to the Japanese collectively as "living, snarling rats;" Marines in the Solomons recalled smelling their prey on the wind, "the gamey smell of animals" carrying in the hot jungle night.[46] Gallagher uses the same casual racism to distance a captured Japanese soldier, saying off-handedly, "They sure can stink" (192).

For Martinez, who attempts to extract gold teeth from a body, degrading the corpse invites an odd union of emotions:

> The teeth spattered loose. Some landed on the ground and a few lay scattered over the crushed jaw of the corpse. Martinez picked up four or five gold ones in a frenzy and dropped them in his pocket. He was sweating terribly, and his anxiety seemed to course through his body with the pumping of his heart. He took a few deep breaths, and gradually it subsided. He was feeling a mixture of guilt and glee, and he thought of a time in his childhood when he had stolen a few pennies from his mother's purse (214).

In this scene, Mailer begins to depict the odd paradox of using race to dehumanize the enemy. Though Martinez equates the experience of mutilating a corpse to something shockingly

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[44] Craig Cameron, "Race and Identity: The Culture of Combat in the Pacific War" (*The International History Review* 27,3, 2005), 557-8.
[45] Eugene Sledge, "With the Old Breed" (Ballantine Books, 1981) 122.
[46] Weingartner, "Trophies of War," 55.

commonplace—the act of stealing coins from a purse—he nonetheless responds physically to the wrongness of the act. It is greed that enables his savagery, and despite attempts to view the Japanese soldier as less than human, Martinez cannot escape the sick suspicion that he *has* done something wrong. "For some reason, he was very frightened" (214), Mailer writes. In naming the discomfort Martinez feels at plundering a corpse, Mailer rejects the simplistic explanation of racial hatred as a catch-all for determining American sentiments towards the enemy. Though Martinez's feelings may not be universal, even within the platoon they suggest that Mailer does not find the explanation of racial contempt as sufficient for enabling savagery. In *The Naked and the Dead,* there is something additional at play within men that allows them to commit atrocities.

Martinez's character continues to undergo transformations in his relationship with savagery and race. As he plunges a knife into the neck of a Japanese sentry, he again expresses a peculiar disdain towards the body:

> The dead sentry was loathsome to him, something to be avoided; he had the mixture of relief and revulsion a man feels after chasing a cockroach across a wall and finally squashing him. It affected him exactly that way and not much more intensely. He shuddered because of the drying blood on his hands, but he would have shuddered as much from the roach's pulp (595-596).

Martinez once again equates the other to less-than-human—this time a roach, an insect that rarely produces feelings of sympathy. Mailer implies that Martinez's repulsion originates not in the murder itself, but rather in a more dispassionate disgust caused by viewing a subhuman corpse. And yet, Mailer complicates the situation by reminding the reader that Martinez is a "racial other" himself, intensely aware of how race can be used to dehumanize. The relationship between race and expectations of savagery is on his mind even seconds before he kills Japanese soldier. As a Mexican-American, Martinez identifies with American mythology and ideals but

nonetheless recognizes his exclusion from both the platoon and the national narrative because of his race. In an earlier scene, Martinez monologues about the space he occupies in Texas, where heroes are white, Protestant, and aloof:

> Martinez made sergeant. Little Mexican boys also breathe the American fables. If they cannot be aviators or financiers or officers they can still be heroes. No need to stumble over pebbles and search the Texas sky. Any man jack can be a hero. Only that does not make you white Protestant, firm and aloof (67).

In the last moments before he kills the sentry, Martinez recalls a conversation he once overheard between two Texans: "Never trust a goddamn Mex when he's got a knife" (594). Infuriated by the idea that these words will define him, Martinez displays awareness of the injustice of racism. And yet, he does not extend sympathy to the Japanese sentry, characterizing the corpse as a foreign insect. The scene is not savage because it depicts a killing—to the contrary, Martinez kills the sentry only because he must—but rather because despite exhibiting a high level of awareness of the other man's humanity, Martinez cannot produce an emotion resembling remorse, or anything other than the cool disgust of having crushed an insect. In scenes such as these, Mailer's depictions of racial violence are much more complicated than the black-and-white dynamic of race war; the platoon's characters are acutely aware of the racial boundaries that divide Americans and aware of each other's humanity, but commit atrocities despite this fact. Mailer uses race as a mechanism to dissect savagery, diagnosing it as a product of human nature rather than excusing it as product of the societal disease of racism.

When Mailer's characters do see past their programmed contempt for the Japanese, the results create disturbing realizations:

> Very deep inside himself he was thinking that this was a man who had once wanted things, and the thought of his own death was always a little unbelievable to him. The man had had a childhood, a youth and a young manhood, and there had been dreams and memories (216).

In this passage, as Red comes down from the dizzy high of hunting for souvenirs amongst rotting bodies, he encounters a startling truth: that the enemy is human after all. The body is no longer just a "fuggin Jap," but a person with a history – a feature often denied to the victims of savagery. This passage fosters one of the key suspicions aroused by Mailer's discussion of race and violence – that American soldiers did possess the capacity to see past their blind hatred, and participated in atrocities nonetheless. In a 2017 article, Paul Bloom wrote, "The sadism of treating human beings like vermin lies precisely in the recognition that they are not."[47] In picking apart characters' deeper thoughts in the wake of savagery, Mailer eventually arrives at this dark point—in *The Naked in the Dead*, race is an outlet that justifies savagery each soldier was already capable of.

Mailer draws racial distinctions between the soldiers in the platoon in order to give dimension to the idea that Americans used race as an outlet for a pre-existing savagery. Each soldier wrangles with feelings of "otherness"—Roth and Goldstein are Jews, but dissimilar even from each other; Martinez is Mexican-American from Texas; and Croft is a white Texan, perhaps the most alien of all the men in the platoon. Mutual contempt not uncommon for the time of writing defines interactions between these groups, despite the fact that the platoon represents a cohesive team in the end. Mailer paints the racial dynamics of the platoon with surprising optimism, as the men grow closer out of necessity. At the end of the novel, the men in the platoon overcome (or at least set aside) their racial prejudices long enough to climb a literal and metaphorical mountain.

Mailer depicts the platoon's capacity to accept racial others throughout *The Naked and the Dead.* For instance, the platoon ridicules and dislikes Roth for his Jewishness basically

[47] Paul Bloom, "The Root of All Cruelty?" (*The New Yorker,* 2017).

without exception, and Roth experiences an increasing sense of isolation because of the persistent disdain directed towards him. And yet, Roth's death "shatters" (684) the platoon. The others feel his loss deeply, and experience sensations of guilt. Despite his otherness, the platoon ultimately treats Roth with humanity. Similarly, Goldstein displays sympathy towards Wilson in his last hours of suffering, even as Wilson hounds Goldstein with insults ("'Y' goddam Jewboy,'" Wilson spits at Goldstein even as he lies dying (667)). Mailer's exploitation of the racial differences between the members of the platoon in such scenes results in contradictory conclusions, mirroring the absurdity of war and violence: first, that the racial divisions in the platoon created pain and rifts among the platoon unto death; second, that these differences could be forgiven. If Mailer's characters are capable of seeing past racial divisions, what should the reader make of their capacity to engage in savagery?

Mailer's explanation of Sergeant Croft's brutality may provide a cynical answer to this question; he is the most savage of the platoon, and according to Mailer, acts that way just for the sake of it—or maybe because he is a Texan, a peculiar breed of American that for Mailer seems to represent the most hyper-masculine, violence-prone subspecies of American available to his 1940s audience.

The first time Croft kills, he does so only out of "curious temptation" (161)—an act that results in "hollow excitement." Croft thrives in battle; as Brown explains, "Croft loves combat, he *loves* it." Time and again, Mailer emphasizes that Croft's disposition is unnatural; that he was created to "HATE EVERYTHING WHICH IS NOT [HIMSELF]" (163). He is an extreme embodiment of white Anglo-Saxon cruelty and thrives on the act of violence without pausing to consider a stimulus. Croft does not discriminate by race when choosing his victims; he is equally cruel towards the Japanese and his own platoon. Again, in creating a character that defies typical

explanations for American savagery in the Pacific, Mailer urges readers to seek a more nuanced explanation for violence.

The Naked and the Dead's interpretation of the role of race in the Pacific War is by no means an exhaustive solution for how and why American soldiers engaged in savagery. Again, there is truth to the idea that Americans engaged in acts of savagery towards the Japanese as retaliatory measures in response to the incomprehensibly brutal tactics of the Japanese military. Mailer does suggest that racial hatred was a shield American soldiers used to justify acts of savagery that were in reality more personal, but that the Pacific Theater saw the most atrocities committed by Americans is a fact. My interpretation of Mailer's writing doesn't disprove this historical data, but it does imply that Mailer's diagnosis of American savagery is more comprehensive than historians' who suggest that race was *the* cause of savagery. Moreover, I don't interpret Mailer's work to mean that the racial differences between the Americans and the Japanese were *not* critical to fostering savagery; to the contrary, race is an entry point characters in *The Naked and the Dead* access to begin justifying violence. Racial hatred made violence acceptable on a large scale, but Mailer's characters indulge in savagery for reasons that exceed racial animosity.

Again, as a Jewish veteran, Mailer himself offers a unique perspective on the US military and race; however, generalizing about how Mailer's own experiences translated into fiction in *The Naked and the Dead* is a dangerous game. Himself an "other" in the military, Mailer nonetheless "was much more obsessed with what it meant to be American and what it meant to be a man" than by what it meant to be Jewish. He once wrote, "I don't believe anyone has ever understood my relation to being a Jew."[48] Though he seeks to depict the schizophrenic national

[48] Adam Kirsch, "The Time of His Time: Letters From Norman Mailer" (*Tablet,* 2014).

consciousness of America in *The Naked and the Dead,* readers can only guess at what Mailer himself really thought about the racial other in the Pacific. Indeed, while *The Naked and the Dead's* cast of characters recognize the horror of human nature, none of them ever express remorse for their crimes.

Isolation and Savagery

If *The Thin Red Line* is a study in shared suffering, *The Naked and the Dead* illustrates a tale of personal misery, emphasized by the structure of both the novel and Mailer's careful articulation of each character's past. Personal drama between soldiers and the savagery that often follows this drama intensifies as the platoon grows increasingly isolated in the jungles of Anopopei. "The artillery, the small-arms fire they had been hearing constantly, might be nothing, something scattered along the front, or it might be all concentrated now in the minuscule inferno of combat," Hearn thinks. "None of it matched. The night had broken them into all the isolated units that actually they were" (108). Originally part of a 6000-man force, the platoon becomes increasingly insular, cut off from the regiment.

The separation of the platoon from a greater unit and the claustrophobia of the jungle creates a paranoid mood throughout the novel. As the days grow hotter, the men more tired, and Mount Anaka looms larger overhead, a sense of unease mounts. Eventually, a shared sense of loathing and reluctant codependency creates an atmosphere of toxic aggression. Early on, Roth senses the paradox of loneliness even amongst peers; excluded because of his Jewishness and his general demeanor, Roth's anxiety builds at the thought of not belonging:

> Why didn't I tell Brown he ought to be glad I stood an extra half hour of guard for him? he asked himself abruptly, and felt frustrated and bitter that he had failed to answer him. Wait, I'll tell him in the morning, he assured himself angrily. Of the men in the platoon he decided there was not one of them he really liked. They're

> all stupid, he said to himself. There wasn't a single one of them who was the least bit friendly to a new man, and he felt a spasm of loneliness (119).

Roth's insecurity magnifies a key feature of the simmering unrest within the platoon. His loneliness breeds anger and a sour resentment that comes to define the interactions between the men in violent scenes. The matter is complicated by the fact that the platoon's general dislike of Roth is not wholly ethnic, but also derives from Roth's general ineptitude as a soldier. Brown delivers a brooding internal monologue over a particular incident in which Roth did not do his duty and thus endangered the platoon:

> That fuggin Roth, Brown said to himself, falling asleep on guard and maybe getting us all killed. No man's got a right to do something like that; he lets his buddies down and they ain't a worse thing a man can do. No, sir, Brown repeated, they ain't a worse thing a man can do. I may be afraid and I may have my nerves shot all to hell, but at least I act like a sergeant and take care of my duties (119).

Brown and Roth's frustration originates from the same event: Roth's failure to call Brown to take watch after falling asleep in a foxhole. Other share similar sentiments towards Roth, and in a cruel feedback loop, Roth also becomes disliked for his inclination towards self-pity, driven by his own sense of rejection. These sentiments come into play at one of the most climatic scenes in the novel: the climactic bird killing. Though I discussed the implications of Croft's bird killing at length in an earlier chapter, the aftermath of the scene sends lasting shocks through the platoon.

In the action after the bird killing, Croft's cruelty reaches a climax as he shifts the burden of his violence from the bird to the men of the platoon. His decision to drive the platoon up the mountain—transparently a metaphor for the absurdity of war itself—is an act of savagery as well. The pointless ascent results in the death of Roth and eventually breaks the platoon, driving the men to the edge of their physical and mental limits. Along the way, Hearn dies abruptly,

leaving Croft in charge. Croft's obsession with climbing to the top of Mount Anaka consumes the platoon, driving Croft ever onward even as the platoon's hatred for him grows. Roth, the weakest member of the platoon, is at the edge of his tolerance for Croft's cruelty.

> All the weeks and months Roth had been in the platoon he had absorbed each insult, each reproof with more and more pain. Instead of becoming indifferent or erecting a protective shell, he had become more sensitive. The patrol had keyed him to the point where he could not bear any more abuse, and he drove himself onward now with the knowledge that if he halted for too long the wrath and ridicule of the platoon would come down upon him. But, even with this, he was breaking (659).

That the other men, acutely aware of Roth's suffering, nonetheless fail to advocate for him is evidence of the state of the platoon. Under Croft's hypnotic control the abuse of the platoon erodes Roth's humanity; both the other soldiers and Roth himself sense his rawness. This concept—nakedness, or exposure—is important to Mailer, giving the novel its namesake: *The Naked and the Dead*. In this case, Roth's nakedness means the destruction of the "protective devices" (661) that supported his life outside of the platoon. It is not just war, but the ugliness and natural capacity of men to antagonize one another that results in his nakedness. Though Jones touches on man's capacity for ugliness in *The Thin Red Line*, he places most of the blame for cruelty on the authorities that direct war. Mailer rejects this notion—war enables the platoon's behavior, but dos not cause it.

Ultimately, the toxicity of the platoon drives Roth to death. Faced with crossing a narrow ledge, Roth jumps despite knowing his legs aren't capable of making the leap. He plummets to his death, bitter and defenseless. While nakedness is a recurring theme in the novel, describing at different times corpses and women, it most commonly refers to vulnerability—the consequence of *The Naked and the Dead's* warring identities, the interminable loneliness of the jungle, and the cruelty of one's comrades.

Savagery As Pleasure

I have already described Croft's affinity for war and cruelty. Mailer clearly intends for readers to believe that Croft derives pleasure from violence, but I argue that the other members of the platoon also experience pleasure as a dimension of savagery. As covered in the chapter *Sex and Savagery*, the collision of violence and pleasure is a common theme in war literature. Jones certainly addresses the concept in *The Thin Red Line*; in many scenes, characters experience arousal and must confront the uncomfortable eroticism of savagery. But unlike Jones, Mailer seems to theorize that the pleasure soldiers experience in combat situations goes beyond the hormonal intersection between violence and sex. Mailer's characters verbalize—at least internally—the secret thrills they feel at committing savage acts.

Forced to "finish off" a pair of Japanese soldiers, Red confronts this reality in what Mailer calls "a wash of many transient subtle emotions":

> He had an intense distaste for what he was about to do, and yet as he stared at the body and pointed his sights at the man's neck, he was feeling a pleasurable anticipation. He tightened his finger on the trigger, taking up the slack, tensing himself for the moment when he would fire and the slugs would make round little holes in a cluster, and the corpse would twitch and shake under the force of the bullets (190).

Though the sensations Red expresses are sensory, the "pleasurable anticipation" he derives from his position of power is, from Mailer's perspective, about more than the involuntary excitement of violence. Mailer's characters instead anticipate deriving pleasure from the cruel or painful; pleasure often accompanies moments of pity, anger, and madness. Mailer writes at length on this odd aspect of pleasure—if anything, pleasure is a coded response to all extreme emotion, an extension of both fear and savagery. Unlike Jones, Mailer emphasizes the agency characters possess in indulging in pleasure. Mailer's characters feel "pleasurable fury" (277), "pleasurable malice" (21), and "pleasurable sorrow" (140), where

Jones's characters feel a "sudden explosion of pleasure" (282), or as Jones writes in his cynical dedication, "pleasure, excitement, and adrenal stimulation."[49] In *The Naked and the Dead,* Mailer most commonly attaches the sensation of pleasure to a separate reaction; Jones's characters certainly feel pleasure, but the sensation can often be taken at face value—soldiers feel pleasure at "shooting well" (204) or winning an argument. Mailer's characters experience pleasure often at the expense of others—for example, Minetta thinks of his platoon mates with "pleasurable pity" (354). The effect is a somewhat stylized rendering of human emotion completely absent from *The Thin Red Line*. Again, Mailer attempts a more sophisticated understanding of war and violence, with somewhat clichéd results. As Gore Vidal wrote in a 1960 review of Mailer's book on writing, *Advertisements for Myself*, "Every time I got going in [*The Naked and the Dead's*] narrative I would find myself stopped cold by a set of made-up, predictable characters taken, not from life, but from the same novels all of us had read, and informed by […] naïveté."[50]

Interestingly, history and science do not entirely support Mailer's pessimistic view of man's capacity for finding pleasure in war. In his book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society,* Lt. Col. Dave Grossman discusses the reluctance of many WWII veterans to commit violent acts. The book has been "required reading at the FBI Academy, the DEA Academy, and a great many other law enforcement agencies nationwide," and it offers a broad historical review of the relationship between war and violence.[51] Grossman, too, acknowledges the intersection between pleasure and violence, writing, "In a way, the study of killing in combat is very much like the study of sex. Killing is a private,

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[49] Jones, *Thin Red Line*, dedication page.
[50] Gore Vidal, "The Norman Mailer Syndrome" (*The Nation*, 1960).
[51] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

intimate occurrence of tremendous intensity, in which the destructive act becomes psychologically very much like the procreative act."[52] Both killing and sex breed fascination, a fact represented in the giant cultural space these concepts occupy. But Grossman also argues that humans possess a powerful reluctance to kill one another. He doesn't deny the place of "exhilaration" in violence—in fact, he notes it as a response stage to killing—but instead characterizes these positive emotions as normal, drawing on first-person narratives to explain how pleasure and exhilaration are natural emotional responses to the intense experience of violence rather than proof of bad character:

> Sol, a veteran of naval combat in World War II, told of his exhilaration when he saw his ship shelling a Japanese-held island. Later, when he saw the charred and mangled Japanese bodies, he felt remorse and guilt, and for the rest of his life he has been trying to rationalize and accept the pleasure he felt. Sol, like thousands of others I have spoken to, was profoundly relieved to realize that his deepest, darkest secrets were no different than those of other soldiers with similar experiences.[53]

Grossman perhaps touches on one of the primary differences between Mailer and Jones in his book. *On Killing* makes a strong case for humanity's aversion to cruelty and reluctance to kill; likewise, Jones creates characters who kill but who largely express remorse for their actions by later experiencing guilt, even if they engage in savagery during violent encounters. Mailer's characters are often irredeemable in their cruelty, Croft embodying the worst human qualities in war.

Though both *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Thin Red Line* are works of fiction, one must ask to what degree Mailer's lack of combat experience influenced his depiction of violence in *The Naked and the Dead.* Mailer himself saw little combat and ended his military

[52]Ibid., 2.
[53]Ibid., 246.

career a cook in Japan, while Jones, as previously discussed, fought and killed on Guadalcanal (not as a Marine, but still, Jones likely saw substantially more up-close violence than Mailer).[54] Mailer writes with minimal authority on the subject of killing, but paints a much darker picture of man's psyche; what does this say about his understanding of war, and the cultural importance of *The Naked and the Dead?* Mailer's attempts to understand the men of the platoon through long-winded forays into each character's consciousness seem somewhat fruitless; he fails to illuminate the passing moments of bravery and humanity captured at times with surprising tenderness in *The Thin Red Line.* As a New York Times review said of the novel in 1948, "[It is] a triumph of realism, but without the compassion which gives final authority in the realm of human conduct." A quote on *The Thin Red Line* provides striking contrast—novelist and veteran Romain Gary wrote, "Like all great books, it leaves one with a feeling of wonder and hope."[55]

Of course, Mailer's artistic prerogative may be to emphasize the evil of war by marking the smallness and cruelty of each man in the platoon, but the effect of this technique is more critical of the American identity than it is of war itself. It is worth noting that Mailer disagrees—in the foreword, he writes:

> So, I am still fond of *The Naked and the Dead*. It has virtues, it has faults, but it also has a redeeming, even stimulating touch of Tolstoyan compassion, and thereby enables me to feel hope for all of us when very occasionally I go back and read a few pages. Allow me then to suppose that there is a good deal of hope to be found if one reads all of its pages (2).

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[54] Charles McGrath, "Norman Mailer, Towering Writer With a Matching Ego, Dies at 84" (*The New York Times*, November 11, 2007).
[55] Scribners ad, Box 68, Series II. Correspondence, 1959-81(Paris and Later) 1962, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Perhaps Mailer refers to the few moments of redemption the platoon experiences – the recognition of each other's humanity, their occasional blind courage—but Jones presents the more coherent narrative of the warring natures of pleasure and violence.

Aftermath and Self-Medication

One thing Mailer and Jones agree upon is the importance of alcohol in war; it acts as both a comforter and an enabler, bookending violent episodes in both novels. Mailer precedes a souvenir-hunting mission with a group drinking scene:

> Wilson was feeling exceptionally good. The whisky had filled his body with a rosy sense of complete well-being. His groin was filling, becoming tumescent, and his nose quivered with excitement…(201)

It is Wilson who leads the platoon into the woods to hunt for treasures on the bodies of dead Japanese soldiers. He does so because he is intoxicated; Mailer notes that Wilson's drinking always follows a familiar pattern, where "after a time he would feel a need for some external excitement and he would become bored and a trifle sober. He would fidget, become a little agitated, and then abruptly he would leave the bar or the house where he was drinking, and wander away to accept whatever adventures might occur" (207). The souvenir hunting proceeds with chilling results. The men drunkenly encounter a ridge littered with bodies, the corpses distended from the heat and crawling with maggots. Mailer offers some hint that alcohol enables the men to respond with relatively little disgust, writing, "A touch of fear penetrated through Red's drunkenness…" (212) Nonetheless, the men proceed to wander amongst the bodies, seeking trophies and displaying alarming disregard for the corpses. Only as his sobriety returns does Red recover some sense of horror:

> Red grunted. He was looking at a corpse which lay almost naked on its back. It was an eloquent corpse, for there were no wounds on its body, and its hands were

> clenching the earth as if to ask for a last time the always futile question. The naked shoulders were hunched together in anguish, and he could easily conceive the expression of pain that should have been on the corpse's mouth. But the corpse lay there without a head, and Red ached dully as he realized the impossibility of ever seeing that man's face. There was only a bloody fragment at the terminus of the neck. The body seemed to lie in a casing of silence. Abruptly Red realized he was sober and very weary (216).

This scene marks the return of Red's disgust and provides perhaps the most literal reference to "the naked and the dead." Relieved of his drunkenness, Red must confront the headless corpse's humanity—a detail previously suspended in unreality by alcohol. Not much time passes before "the liquor [started wearing] off for all of them, and they were silent" (217).

Though liquor is clearly instrumental in the instigation of the souvenir-hunting scene, it also plays different roles in *The Naked and the Dead*. Soldiers use it for its medicinal properties, seeking to forget the reality of their situation. In one scene, the platoon laments that "the beer had been far too inadequate to make them drunk; it made them only moody and reflective, it opened the gate to all their memories, and left them sad, hungering for things they could not name" (253). In small doses, alcohol only intensifies the emotions the soldiers seek to obliterate; its utility is double-edged.

Alcohol for self-medication is far more prevalent in *The Thin Red Line*. Jones writes at length about the necessity of liquor and its relation to prolonging "battle numbness." As Jones writes of C-for-Charlie, "Soon they would be back in the dull, mudhaunted, airraidfear-ridden routine of life they had lived before—B.C., as some wit said: Before Combat. A source of liquor simply had to be found" (483). And most memorably, C-for-Charlie hosts a "blind, crazy drunk in a wild mass bacchanalian orgy which lasted twenty-eight hours and used up all the available whiskey" (465) to recover from their battle with the Japanese. Though mood of the orgy is jovial,

Jones gestures to the underlying truth that alcohol is the only thing delaying trauma from reaching the soldiers:

> The orgy itself was incredible. And it only stopped at all when it was discovered in drunken panic, like in some mad, fearridden, delirium tremens nightmaredream, that there was not a single Imperial quart, not a single drop of whiskey left anywhere in C-for-Charlie (465).

Ironically, the ending of the orgy and reinstatement of reality more resembles a "nightmaredream" than the orgy's retreat into drunkenness. During the orgy the normal nightmarish order of things is suspended. C-for-Charlie confronts the tyrant First Lieutenant Band, emboldened by alcohol; their rebellion temporarily destroys the chain of command that Jones blames as one of the most potent weapons against men. Interestingly, Jones links the effects of alcohol to those of combat numbness. By getting drunk, the men prolong the effects of numbness, suggesting that alcohol itself is a similar necessity for waging war.

> All of them were a little bit mad. The combat numbness, with its stary eyes and drawn faces, had not yet left them and would not, this time, for a much longer period than last time. This led John Bell to theorize privately that, given a sufficient number of times up on the line after each of which it took longer to lose it and recover, combat numbness might possibly perhaps become a permanent state (466).

Bell is of course wrong—most members of C-for-Charlie are horrified to discover that combat numbness is impermanent even after the men become seasoned veterans. Alcohol is a way of artificially keeping reality at bay; "Liquor, as almost all of C-for-Charlie saw it, was their only hope" (482). As the soldiers return to routine and their liquor dries up, fear returns. Alcohol is a potent presence in *The Thin Red Line*, constantly offered as a reward or medicine for the horrors of combat. In typical fashion, Jones and Mailer attribute different purposes to alcohol (Mailer primarily uses alcohol as a device to instigate savagery, while Jones uses it as a

recovery from savagery), but liquor features strongly in both narratives, and historians agree that alcohol probably played a vital role in World War II.

The history of alcohol in war is a long and complicated one. Episodes of violence punctuated with heavy drinking appear in different iterations across many different wars, whether in the form of SS officers using alcohol as a "lubricant" for committing atrocities against the Jews or American soldiers in the Pacific drinking mash to recover from combat stress. [56] In Iraq, men drank "hajji juice," moonshine brought to bases by contractors, and then engaged in unspeakable behavior: shooting up civilian cars or in one case raping a 14-year-old girl and killing her family.[57] This is partly why the army has attempted to eliminate its culture of drinking in recent decades—the legacy of substance abuse left by Vietnam (a drug and alcohol addicted veteran population) spurred the military to adopt harsher measures against drinking. As similar measures failed to stop Jones's characters from improvising a homemade swill called "swipe" in *The Thin Red Line*, such regulations also fail to halt drinking in the military in modern times.

Mailer himself was a heavy drinker. In 1960 he stabbed his wife Adele at a party intended to launch Mailer's political aspirations. He'd been drinking a lot all night and reportedly told guests after the stabbing, "Don't touch her. Let the bitch die."[58] In the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, there is box of James Jones's personal documents from the year 1960. Carefully clipped and folded in the box are several newspaper articles detailing the attacks and Mailer's subsequent committal to Bellevue Hospital.

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[56] Edward Westermann, Edward B. "Drinking Rituals, Masculinity, and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany" (*Central European History* 51,3, 2018), 367–89.
[57]Paul von Zeilbauer, "For U.S. Troops at War, Liquor Is Spur to Crime" (*The New York Times*, March 13, 2007).
[58] Lennon, *Double Life,* 280-7.

The curious relationship between Mailer and Jones had already begun to dissolve by the late 1950s. In 1956, after Mailer evidently published some of the pair's letters in the *Village Voice,* Jones reacted with vitriol, writing:

> March 31
> I still believe there are great books in you. Great books. If you can ever get them out. But I certainly doubt very much if you'll ever do it while writing a fucking column for the Village Voice.[59]

Their friendship only continued to deteriorate in the following years, unraveling amidst quarrels involving everything from artistic "integrity" to their wives. In 1959 Mailer was working on a review titled "Evaluation: Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room,"[60] including a section called "Biography of a Style." The review came on the heels of Jones's negative reaction to *The Deer Park*, Mailer's third book (which Jones called "pretty bad"[61]). Biographer Michael Lennon sets the scene:

> [Mailer] begins his comments on Jones generously, saying that *From Here to Eternity* was the best American novel since the end of World War II, despite being "ridden with faults, ignorances, and a smudge of the sentimental." He was unique, Mailer said, because "he had come out of nowhere, self-taught, a clunk in his lacks, but the only one of us who had the beer-guts of a broken glass brawl." But his early success "handcuffed the rebel in him." He concluded that if Jones "dares not to castrate his hatred of society with a literary politician's assy cultivation of it, then I would have to root for him because he may have been born to write a great novel."[62]

Mailer's comments appeared to wound Jones. Jones had long valued Mailer's opinion, but the tone of "Biography" contradicted his earlier praise of Jones's work. Mailer had once claimed *From Here to Eternity* made him "sick with gripe" because it was too good; now it was

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[59] Correspondence from James Jones to Norman Mailer, 31 March 1956, Box 54, James Jones Papers 1890-1981, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
[60] Lennon, *Double Life*, 247.
[61] Ibid.,179.
[62] Ibid., 250.

"ridden with faults."[63] The two parted for six years until they met again at a party in 1965. The pair disappeared into a bedroom and when they reemerged, Mailer appeared "quite moved." Jones reported that the two had mended things, but noted grimly: "I love him, but I don't like him."[64]

In 2007, now at the end of his life, Mailer reflected on his relationship with Jones in a letter to Ray Elliot, a board member of the James Jones Literary Society. Michael Lennon, Mailer's biographer, recalls a conversation with Mailer about the letter:

> Three weeks later, [Mailer] wrote to Ray Elliott, a board member of the James Jones Literary Society, who had written to him seeking Mailer's endorsement for the establishment of a chair in Jones's name at Eastern Illinois University. I remember that he showed me the letter when I arrived that day, and asked me a few questions about the idea […] He said more than once that his relationship with Jones was the most intense and competitive male friendship of his life. Jones appears to have felt the same way […] Writing with a shaky hand, Mailer wrote the following letter, his last, at the bottom of Elliott's.
> *August 3, 2007*
> *Dear Ray,*
> *Here is a statement that you should feel free to use in your effort to launch the James Jones Chair.*
>
> *James Jones is one of the few major American novelists to emerge here since the Second World War. He was an immensely talented man and I think it is a splendid idea to endow a chair in his name at Eastern Illinois University. He would have grumbled, but I think it would have given him true pleasure.*
>
> *Sincerely, Norman Mailer* [65]

Mailer died only a few months after writing this letter. The story of James Jones and Norman Mailer is a strange one, marked equally by jealousy and love. Their friendship tracked the narratives they produced in their novels: stories of innocence lost, of lust and violence, and perhaps—in the end—redemption.

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[63] Ibid., 948.
[64] Ibid., 258.
[65] Mailer, *Selected Letters*, "714. To Ray Elliot."

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I am a graduating senior in the College of Liberal Arts with degrees in Plan II and History. This thesis is the culmination of a decade-long fascination with war fiction, which I have now had the opportunity to interact with at the scholarly level as well as through my own personal interest. I love writing and anticipate doing lots of it in law school, where I am headed next fall. Between now and then, I will be catching up on reading that is not war-related and biking from Austin to Alaska.